

Returning Scales by Ron Hinkle

There are all sorts of scale exercises available for wind instruments. Many of them work for the plectrum banjo as well, and serve the same basic purpose; *mastery of the instrument*. The only trick is learning to apply them to the banjo!

The plectrum is not generally considered to be a “scale instrument,” which is a shame; that generalization has grown over the years into an excuse for *not* learning them. Besides, Chord Melody doesn’t require them, so why bother? Well, Harry Reser and Perry Bechtel (*my* two favorite plectrum banjoists) saw no limitations in the plectrum, so *why should we?* Sure, one could argue that they were “something special,” and that nobody else could possibly play like them, but I refuse to limit myself in that way. What they accomplished (95 years ago!) also required a lot of *study* and *hard work*, which any of us are capable of.

Those two “banjo heroes” (and a few others since) saw no problem going beyond the instrument’s surface limitations into new territory—territory that has been largely forgotten with the overriding popularity of Chord Melody. Heck, it wasn’t even “new” for them; they were simply applying *music* to the banjo, which *itself* was new at the time! So, nobody told them it “couldn’t be done!” Anyway, my purpose here is to teach you how to play scales, not to get on my soapbox.

Simply put, scales and scale patterns teach the fingers how to play music! There are no “easy” shortcuts here, unless you’re some kind of musical savant who can just copy it without pretense or even knowing what it is. If you are one of these *exceedingly rare* individuals, carry on. Otherwise. . . “Learning new tricks” can only *increase* the possibilities for jazz **improvisation** (or just general **improvement**), and increase your ultimate potential.

One of the common scale exercise variations is called “returning scales.” Play a scale up three notes, return to the first note, then go up to the next note and do the same thing; this pattern is repeated until the whole scale has been played. The same basic pattern is then played in a descending direction (I added the arpeggio at the end for technical flair). There are many variations on this basic theme, some of which I will introduce in subsequent lessons.

Look at TAB “A” (next page); you’ll notice that it is entirely on the third string (except for the arpeggio at the end). Similarly, TAB “B” is entirely on the second string. If you think of each four-note section as an individual piece of the puzzle, it makes sense to be able to play them anywhere they exist—and on the plectrum banjo, each one exists in many places! So, play the whole exercise entirely on one string (and then the other) so you can concentrate on the fingering patterns. Obviously, you can combine the individual string patterns in any way you desire to suit the situation.

TAB “C” is where we get down to brass tacks. In actual use, it will make more sense to use *all* of the strings at your disposal (the fourth string presents bigger challenges, and is pretty much impractical for use in this type of pattern). The challenge is in how to skip from one string to the next. Simple: *Just do it!* On the way up, your index finger is already in a good position; you just need to move *back* to the appropriate fret. On the way down, however, this is not so simple. Here, the trick is to bar two strings with your little finger at the appropriate place; bar the 1st and 2nd strings at the 9th fret, and jump to the next note, going from the 1st string/9th fret B to the 2nd string/10th fret A. Do the same again for the 2nd string/8th fret G to the 3rd string/10th fret F. Exaggerate your hand movements, making them snappy and deliberate. Watch the attached video demonstration.

This type of “slight-of-hand” (which many would consider to be “cheating”) can multiply the possibilities for the plectrum! I remember Buddy Wachter talking about the “w.i.t. principal”; “*whatever it takes.*” How do you think Django Reinhardt did so much on the guitar with only two usable fingers? Once you’ve mastered it—and it’s

